



"Guerrilla Diplomats": Conflict Prevention Through Frontline Diplomacy

Gerrit Kurtz

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With conflict causing much political instability and human suffering in parts of the world, there is a need for preventive diplomacy which stops the outbreak, relapse or escalation of organized violence. Frontline diplomats have potentially crucial roles to play in early preventive efforts.

Conflict prevention is popular in international political circles these days. In April 2016, the UN Security Council and General Assembly passed concurring resolutions on the review of the UN peacebuilding architecture in which they confirmed the essential role of the UN in “preventing the outbreak, escalation, continuation and recurrence of conflict”. On 5 July, the German Federal Foreign Office launched a public outreach process for the development of new guidelines on civilian crisis prevention, an area for which it **increased** its funds by 260% from 2015 to 2016 to 248.5 million €. Last year, the British government **announced** plans to increase its Conflict, Stability and Security Fund from 1 to 1.3 billion pounds by 2019/20.

The political reasoning behind the call for prevention is simple: if the escalation of political disputes into organized violence or even outright civil war can be stopped in its tracks, it not only saves lives, but also keeps refugee flows created by war at bay and helps leaders avoid making difficult and potentially unpopular decisions about whether to launch military interventions to quell conflicts. Despite what seemed like a long-term decline of organized violence, the number of armed conflicts has ticked up again in the past few years: 2014 **saw** 40 armed conflicts, the highest number since 1999, and 126,059 conflict-related fatalities, the highest number since 1994, according to

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the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#). At the end of 2015, [65.3 million people](#) were either internally displaced or international refugees, the highest number since the Second World War. Yet many UN member states tend to view conflict prevention with [suspicion](#), as they fear international meddling in what they perceive to be their domestic political affairs.

Putting high-flying international commitments to conflict prevention into practice and “sustaining peace” throughout the conflict cycle, as the SC and GA affirmed in their parallel resolutions, requires an astute handling of sensitive matters with [intelligence and tact](#), [prudence and patience](#). In short: diplomacy. While government ministries can, of course, reach out to their foreign counterparts directly and permanent representatives negotiate mandates for international organisations in New York or Geneva, frontline diplomats, i.e. members of the foreign service posted abroad, have potentially crucial roles to play in early preventive efforts. Preventive diplomacy [aims](#) at the short- to medium-term prevention of the outbreak, relapse or escalation of organized violence, through both coercive and non-coercive means serving a political purpose. Taking preventive diplomacy seriously requires a different, more active and principled kind of diplomacy. In order to do adjust to this profile, frontline diplomats need to be better equipped, trained, and organisationally empowered.

Frontline preventive diplomacy: benefits and risks


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Frontline diplomats may be able to resort to thematic expertise, funds or international networks that they can employ to tweak political dynamics in a

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country. As some diplomats are repeatedly posted to conflict regions, they may draw comparative conclusions and show domestic parties the risky trajectories of their actions. And diplomats are, theoretically at least, trained in the very skills of facilitation, brokering and negotiation that might be needed to cool down heated tensions.

As the International Crisis Group lays out in an excellent recent [report](#), preventive diplomacy is fraught with dilemmas and considerable challenges. Usually, the elites in a given country carry the main responsibility for the escalation of political conflicts, and even high-level officials of major powers have limited entry points when positions have become deeply polarized and parties are entrenched in a zero-sum logic. As the Crisis Group succinctly [observes](#): “Outsiders must tread carefully when pursuing these goals. All early action involves engaging in fluid political environments. There is a high chance of political friction, with misunderstandings and miscalculations derailing plans. No form of crisis response is neutral.”

Frontline diplomats may grant insurgent groups unwarranted legitimacy simply by meeting them. Officially mediating between parties may [raise](#) expectations about peaceful conflict resolution, that, when disappointed, may embolden domestic actors to pursue their goals by violent means. Short-term goals of stabilization may conflict with long-term goals of democratisation and transitional justice. Thus, preventive engagements must be based on continuing political analysis and do-no-harm principles.

A different diplomacy

More fundamentally, an active pursuit of conflict prevention requires a different kind of diplomacy. Conventionally, diplomats pursue a narrowly conceived

“national interest”, acting on explicit instructions from the capital. They concentrate on the governing authorities as official partners in their bilateral relations. As a result, their engagement is reactive and ad hoc, while preventive diplomacy requires a forward-looking and principled approach, as David Hamburg already [wrote](#) in 2003.

“I am not the person who sits all day at the office. I want to see how people live out there,” is how German Ambassador to South Africa Walter Lindner [introduces](#) himself in a video message on the embassy’s website. It sums up the kind of spirit diplomats need to embrace are they to further the ambitious objective of conflict prevention. Christopher J. Stevens, the US Ambassador to Libya murdered in 2012, represented the skills of a “[guerrilla diplomat](#)” (Daryl Copeland): multilingual, frequently speaking to people on the street, and showing respect and compassion for local cultures, traits which President Obama [highlighted](#) in his speech at the UN General Debate in September 2012.

Yet these diplomats are usually seen as “unconventional”. If governments want to take their stated objective of crisis prevention seriously, they need to embrace the following policies that support and empower their agents in the field. Political leaders and senior officials need to foster an organisational culture that grants ambassadors and other frontline diplomats more autonomy, based on frequent reporting on their activities. Leaders need to highlight bold behaviour, even when diplomats encounter hostility from host governments despite their most sensitive efforts; rewarding best practices can start horizontal socialization processes. Ministries need to provide frontline diplomats with the authority to quickly disperse small development funds and include them in internal discussions on government-wide country strategies.

Lastly, they need to offer training to their diplomats in conflict analysis, mediation and critical thinking. The German Federal Foreign Office, for example, only **started** to provide dedicated mediation courses to its attachés and more senior diplomats a few weeks ago. Similarly, a recent reform report of the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office **argued** to increase training in stabilisation and mediation as core skills for diplomats posted to fragile areas. Many intra-state conflicts are based on disputes within a country's political elite; foreign diplomats trained in peace mediation may be able to facilitate conversations between polarized parties. As external third parties, they may help local stakeholders to identify mutually acceptable ways that lead out of their conflicts.

Conclusion

Historically, Western biases and wilful ignorance of domestic politics and cultures **have marred** international engagement in conflict prevention and resolution. A healthy dose of scepticism towards a renewed push for preventive diplomacy is therefore warranted. Diplomats need to overcome a rigid binary of local stakeholders whose actions need to be prevented and international actors who conduct preventive diplomacy.

If foreign services embrace a bolder, innovative style of (preventive) diplomacy that rewards local sensitivity, autonomy and innovation, however, they may improve the implementation of their foreign policy overall. Frontline diplomats need to travel in their host country extensively, collecting information about local grievances through first-hand observation. They need to reach out to the host population directly, through personal use of social media, as many British diplomats already do. And they need to maintain reliable relationships with key political actors that continue to function in crisis situations. If diplomats do

that, they will find that an increased attention towards conflict prevention entails benefits – a deeper understanding of elite politics, influence beyond the capital and credibility with a broad spectrum of a country's society – that continue to exist when a crisis ends.

Gerrit Kurtz is a postgraduate research student at the War Studies Department of King's College London, where he researches the role of frontline diplomats in conflict prevention. He is also a non-resident fellow with the Global Public Policy Institute in Berlin, where he worked between 2012 and 2015 on the policies of emerging powers on a responsibility to protect populations from mass atrocity crimes. He also conducted research in South Sudan on local conflict management by UN peace operations. Aside from preventive diplomacy, conflict management and peacekeeping, his research interests include protection of civilians, transitional justice in the conflict in Sri Lanka, the conflict in South Sudan, as well as German and Indian foreign policy.

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